



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

News Release

Pacific Islands External Affairs Office

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28 Critical Habitat Units Proposed for 47 Threatened and Endangered Plants on the Big Island

A critical habitat proposal for the island of Hawaii – the sixth in a series of seven critical habitat proposals covering threatened and endangered Hawaiian plant species – was released today by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. If made final, this proposed rule would establish 28 critical habitat units on the island of Hawaii for 47 threatened and endangered plant species, including 437,285 acres of private, state, and federal lands.

“As the largest and perhaps most undeveloped island within the main Hawaiian islands, the amount of acreage proposed as critical habitat on the Big Island is larger than for other islands,” said Anne Badgley, regional director of the Service’s Pacific Region. “We have worked closely with federal, state, and private landowners to coordinate this proposal and make it as accurate as possible. However, we look forward to additional input to further refine the proposal before it becomes a final rule.”

Critical habitat refers to specific geographic areas that are essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and that may require special management considerations. These areas do not have to be occupied by the species at the time of designation. A critical habitat designation does not set up a preserve or refuge and does not close an area to human access or use, such as for hunting or recreation.

“The long-term recovery of these species depends not only on protecting existing populations, but also on establishing new populations where these plants were once found,” Badgley said. “Many of these species have only one or two populations remaining, which makes them very vulnerable. A wildfire or a hurricane could destroy an entire species.”

The 47 Hawaiian plants were listed as endangered or threatened species between 1991 and 1996. Although they are found at varying elevations and in different vegetation and climate zones, they share many of the same threats to their existence. Competition from introduced plant species; habitat destruction by feral and domestic animals; agricultural, military, and residential development; and predation by cattle, insects, and rats have all contributed to bringing these plants close to extinction.

The proposal designates critical habitat units representative of the known geographic and elevational range of each species and allows for expansion of existing wild populations and reestablishment of wild populations within their historic ranges. In many instances, critical habitat for several plant species overlaps, creating multi-species units.

Of the lands proposed for critical habitat protection, 51 percent are owned by the State of Hawaii, 16 percent are privately owned, and 33 percent are under federal ownership or jurisdiction. Critical habitat

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Working with others, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conserves, protects, and enhances fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

designation only affects activities that are conducted on federal lands, funded by the federal government, or need some type of federal authorization. Few activities on state or private lands would be affected.

“Although we are required to review federal activities that may affect designated critical habitat, in most cases those projects can proceed with only minor accommodations to protect the species,” Badgley explained. “We are required to identify reasonable and prudent measures the project sponsor can undertake to avoid significant damage to critical habitat for a species.”

Nearly all of the lands within the critical habitat units are unsuitable for development, land uses, and activities due to their remote location, lack of access, and rugged terrain. Eighty-four percent of the lands within the proposed critical habitat units on the island of Hawaii are within the State Conservation District, which strictly limits development and most other activities. Sixteen percent are in agricultural zones, and less than 1 percent are in urban areas.

At the time the Service listed each plant, designation of critical habitat was determined to be not prudent due to the threat of vandalism and/or because designation would not benefit the plant. In 1998, the United States District Court for the District of Hawaii directed the Service to review the prudency determinations for 245 listed plant species in Hawaii. The Service was also ordered to publish proposed critical habitat designations or nondesignations for at least 100 species by November 30, 2000, and for the remaining 145 species by April 30, 2002. As a result of a subsequent court order, the Service included proposed critical habitat designations or nondesignations for 10 additional listed plants.

The Service is required to analyze and consider potential economic and social effects of critical habitat designations before finalizing the designations. A draft economic analysis examining the impact of the proposed critical habitat designations is currently under development, and will be made available for public review.

The proposed rule published in the May 28 *Federal Register* is available for a 60-day public comment period. Comments may be sent by mail to the Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-Pacific Islands, Box 50088, Honolulu, Hawaii 96850 or by electronic mail to FW1PIE_BigIsland_crithab@r1.fws.gov. Comments will be accepted until July 29. Requests for a public hearing regarding the proposed rule must be received by July 12.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses nearly 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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